

BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth W. Williams. *Primitive Normativity: Race, Sexuality, and Temporality in Colonial Kenya*. Durham, NC. Duke University Press, 2024. 256 pp. \$26.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-4780-2549-8.

Williams, in *Primitive Normativity: Race, Sexuality, and Temporality in Colonial Kenya*, overturned the table of old ideas and shattered the dominant narrative of primitivity and normativity by showing its shifting nature and slipperiness in colonial Kenya. Braiding together rare archival sources and specialized literature across multiples fields from race, anthropology, gender, sexuality, and queer theory, the six-chapter book, introduction, and conclusion explore the author's innovative concept of primitive normativity. Primitive normativity is a differentially articulated and mutually constitutive idea that seems benevolent on the surface, given it sees Africans as innocent and vulnerable. Yet, its maleficent goal informs the paternalistic biopolitics that colonized, dispossessed, and controlled colonial subjects in alignment with the imperial vision. Primitive normativity intersects at many points and refers to a common center “as a disenfranchising accusation, rather than an empowering affirmation” (23). Williams reveals how revision in anthropology made the timescale, sexuality, and geography of Kenyan Africans normative, and at the same time, queer. Normativity makes them vulnerable, needing paternalistic guidance of colonialists and settlers, while queerness sets them at deviance against the norm, standard, and hierarchy of modernity scale.

In Chapter One, the author situates the shifting notion and articulation of primitivity, which, on the part of sexuality, denotes purity but, within the hierarchy of race and civilization, connotes backwardness and propels diverse policies, including reservations aimed at preventing detribalization and contaminations of colonial subjects in Kenya. This idea of primitivity as indexing normative sexuality will later become a backdrop for postcolonial leaders' rhetoric of queerness as a Western import and, thus, sexual imperialism. In Chapter Two, Williams used the sexual exploitation of three adolescent Kenyans by a British officer and the debates that ensued on consent, bride price (wealth), marriage custom, and indigenous view of African women to explore how primitive normativity sheds the heavy weight of the hypersexual African women yet reinscribes another set of violence that denies them agency.

Continuing, yet taking a detour from the previous chapter, in chapter 3, Williams uses the Indian crisis of 1928 as an entry point to examine the tussle

and scuffle between groups whose claim of primitivism to civilization is indexed by “kinds of sex groups supposedly engaged” as a qualification to claim of tutelage of Kenyans (72). Chapter Four examines how the discourse of primitivity structured interracial relations, class, and gender within the intimate space of the settler home. Through the phrase of “white peril,” Williams shows how white women were accused of being responsible for the sexual violence in settlers’ homes by excessive familiarity, thoughtless behavior such as asking male servants into the bedroom to fasten their dress, scantiness of the garment, ignorance, and mismanagement. This chapter essentially flipped the script and myth of Black and African men’s sexuality as “rapist” by claiming sexual innocence yet absolving indigenous men of agency and voice and, in doing so, infantizes and emasculates them.

Chapter Five explores the spatial conception of Kenya in British popular imaginaries in several Nora Strange novels. In these novels, Kenya at once presents an elixir to frigid and dysfunctional European sexual drives as well as a redemptive landscape for the continuation of colonial mission and reproductive heterosexuality, which is critical to the maintaining of white supremacy in Kenya. The critical textual analysis in this chapter offers new modes of spatial analysis in African literature. In Chapter Six, the author explores how different and contrasting elements of primitivity normativity were weaved together to malign, discredit, ignore, and dehumanize the oppositional gaze of Mau Mau—an anti-colonial movement with contested and complicated history and motivations. Here, the logic of primitivity normativity worked by discrediting the oath-taking practices and used the symbolism of consumption as signaling the gendered, sexual, and psychological disorderliness of Mau Mau as a product of excessive exposure to civilization.

Throughout the book, Williams shows that imperial logic and ideas are the same everywhere; even if their interpretation differs, the endpoint of all is dispossession and colonialization. The shifting ways that primitivity normativity is appropriated both in colonial Kenya for imperial goals and later in independent Kenya by Jomo Kenyatta and in recent times by postcolonial patriarchs across the continent as part of homophobic rhetoric, calls our attention to how ideas travel through space and time in ways that regardless of who is deploying it, the aim is to further governmentality. The book is valuable for myriad reasons including the juxtaposition of several insights that go against the grain of dominant knowledge of African sexuality, modernity, and temporality and thus offers new ways of reading that can be adapted beyond the continent. Second, it shows the double bind that women—regardless of race—face, in that their bodies and sexuality become the site for public contestation, construction, and performance of racial pride, virtue, and prestige. Specifically, adapting and amending Hortense Spiller’s insight on the conception of women in colonial Kenya as property points to how the afterlives of the Middle Passage, slavery, and plantation continue to haunt and taunt the reality of Africans on the continent and Black women in African diaspora. Hence, the book’s utility transcends African and African diaspora studies to interlocking ways that powers seek to shape and conform their subjects through media, knowledge, or administration. In all, the author no doubt adds, extends, and offers profound insight that

advances extant scholarship on race, gender, sexuality, settler colonialism, and postcolonial studies both on the continent and in the diaspora.

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